

May 27, 1999

## **The Clinton Administration and Chinese Espionage at U.S. Nuclear Weapons Labs: A Chronology of Key Events**

The following are highlights of a chronology of the key events relevant to the Chinese theft of U.S. nuclear secrets obtained from U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories documented in the report by the House Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China (the "Cox Committee"). The sources used were: "Administration Handling of Security Breach at Los Alamos: Reported Timeline of Important Events," Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, May 1999; and "Chronology: The Data Trail," *New York Times*, 5/2/99. For the purposes of brevity the word "reportedly" has been deleted in most cases but can be inferred by the reader. Dates are given by month (mm/yy) or year (yyyy) as available but the sequence of events can be considered reliable.

- 1978: Wen Ho Lee is hired at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.
- 1982: Mr. Lee telephones a scientist suspected of stealing neutron bomb secrets from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. The F.B.I. eavesdrops on the call, and investigates Mr. Lee, who passes a polygraph test.
- 1983: Mr. Lee begins to transfer nuclear bomb data from a classified computer system at Los Alamos to an unclassified network open to outsiders.
- 1988: Chinese alleged to have acquired information on W-88, America's most advanced miniature warhead, from Los Alamos National Laboratory.
- 6/95: CIA reportedly acquires Chinese document mentioning W-88. Reports indicate that the military documents were delivered by a walk-in Chinese spy to U.S. officials in Taiwan.
- 1995: Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary briefed on Los Alamos espionage; she briefs the office of the Vice President.
- 11/95: DOE begins "administrative inquiry" into potential loss of sensitive nuclear information. The F.B.I. assists.
- 1995: Mr. Lee makes the last of the known unauthorized transfers of classified computer files, containing millions of lines of secret computer code.

- 3/96: Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch briefed.
- 4/96: DOE briefs National Security Advisor Samuel "Sandy" Berger and Leon Fuerth, Office of the Vice President, on theft of W-88 design, theft of neutron bomb data, and the need to increase security at the weapons laboratories.
- 1996: At some point midyear, FBI and DOE open investigation of three weapons labs and focus on five possible suspects, including Mr. Lee.
- 11/96: DOE Deputy Secretary Charlie Curtis meets with lab directors and head of DOE field offices to review foreign visitors and counterintelligence programs. DOE headquarters, Field Offices, and labs directed to begin implementing six new measures to strengthen foreign visits and counterintelligence programs and undertake further assessment.
- 3/97: Federico Pena confirmed as DOE Secretary following O'Leary's 1/97 resignation, but takes no action on the measures recommended by Deputy Secretary Curtis in 11/96.
- 4/97: DOE Deputy Secretary Curtis leaves DOE, his counterintelligence and foreign visitor programs of 11/96 still not fully adopted by labs or DOE officials.
- 4/97: Mr. Lee moved to another position in which he was responsible for updating a computerized archive of nuclear secrets.
- 7/97: DOE briefs National Security Advisor Berger on W-88 and evidence of other Chinese espionage operations including the theft of neutron bomb data. Mr. Berger reportedly briefs President Clinton (although Mr. Berger reportedly told the Cox Committee in a sworn statement that President Clinton was not briefed until 1998).
- 8/97: Attorney General Janet Reno briefed.
- 1997: CIA Director Tenet and FBI Director Louis Freeh brief DOE Secretary Pena on lax security at labs.
- 1997: FBI makes two requests to Department of Justice for a court warrant to search Mr. Lee's property, but is denied the warrant both times.
- 9/97: FBI Director Freeh tells DOE he does not have evidence to arrest Mr. Lee and does not have evidence for a wiretap, and that there is no longer an investigative reason to allow Mr. Lee to remain in a sensitive position.
- 2/98: President Clinton signs Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 61 mandating new counterintelligence measures at labs.
- 8/98: Bill Richardson takes over as DOE Secretary, following 6/98 departure of Pena.

- 1998: The FBI conducts a sting operation, with agents posing as Chinese spies to try to get Mr. Lee to incriminate himself. Mr. Lee rebuffs them.
- 11/98: Counterintelligence experts send a 25-page report to senior national security officials warning of China's interest in stealing secrets from the computer systems at U.S. government weapons laboratories.
- 11/98: DOE Secretary Richardson submits counterintelligence action plan to NSA Berger.
- 12/98: The House Select Committee (the "Cox Committee") unanimously approves a classified report finding that U.S. security had been harmed by Chinese theft of U.S. nuclear secrets and other sensitive technology.
- 1/99: Summary of Cox Committee report is delivered to the White House.
- 2/99: Mr. Lee fails an FBI polygraph test. Two days later he deletes nearly 2,000 computer files containing enormous amounts of secret data that he had moved to an unclassified system.
- 3/99: *New York Times* publishes a front-page story of allegations of spying at Los Alamos.
- 3/99: Evidence of Mr. Lee's computer deletions is found by the FBI. A reconstruction of the files reveals that he had downloaded the "legacy codes" and accompanying data, which jeopardizes the U.S. nuclear arsenal. DOE Secretary Richardson fires Mr. Lee from Los Alamos for security violations.
- 3/99: CIA Director Tenet orders an outside review by a panel headed by Admiral David Jeremiah (USN-Ret.) of the CIA's internal assessment of the national security damage resulting from possible Chinese espionage at Los Alamos.
- 3/99: DOE Secretary Richardson announces new security initiatives and briefs President Clinton.
- 4/99: DOE suspends for two weeks all scientific work on computers containing sensitive secrets at Los Alamos and two other labs for security improvements.
- 4/99: CIA damages assessment concludes that China benefitted from espionage through theft of W-88 warhead design data from Los Alamos.
- 5/99: House Select Committee (Cox Committee) report released in declassified version.

RPC Staff Contacts: Dr. Yvonne Bartoli and Jim Jatras, 224-2946;  
or Deanna Okun, Office of Senator Murkowski, 224-6665